

What Are the Heritage Foods of the Rio Santa Cruz and Why Do They Matter?

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The cultivation and harvest of domesticated foods began in the Rio Santa Cruz watershed began more than 4100 years ago, making it one of the oldest continuously-farmed cultural landscapes in North America. Surprisingly, some of the same crop varieties that were prehistorically cultivated in the watershed continue to be raised nearby. In addition, Avalon Gardens and Tumacacori National Monument as well as Tubac Presidio State Historic Park may be among the oldest sites where the Spanish introduced crops from the Old World to lands now found within the present-day borders of the U.S.

But just what is a heritage crop variety or livestock breed? It is one that has historically been linked to the identity and livelihoods of families and communities in a particular landscape such as the Santa Cruz Valley. Its seeds or blood line may have been kept within the community for multiple generations, and passed on from one family to the next, or from grandparents to grandchildren. It is not merely the genetic stock which confers heritage status; it is also the oral history about its production, harvest and uses, and the persistence of traditional methods of raising, processing and preparing it for the table. It may have been held within a single clan or culture for decades, or it may have been shared among the many cultures of the landscape without any proprietary ownership conferred upon it. Of course, wild foods may also be considered heritage foods.

Well then, what are some of the heritage foods of the Santa Cruz? They include Mission figs and pomegranates, such as the ones still found at Tumacacori National Monument. They may also include the Mission grapes once vining around Mexican-American homesteads on the Sonoita Plains, and then reintroduced by Gordon Dutt to the Sonoita Vineyards near Elgin. They include the Criollo Corriente and possibly the Texas Longhorn breeds of cattle found in the

headwaters of Sonoita Creek. The white Sonoran tepary beans, chapalote corn and White Sonora wheat being grown at Amado Farms certainly qualify.

For wild foods, we might consider the chiltepin, elderberry blossoms and fruit, mesquite pods, the wild greens known as verdolagas and quelites, and the Emory Oak acorns known as bellotas. The mescal known as lechuguilla might qualify, for it was bootlegged on the edge of the valley through the Prohibition Era. Saguaro and prickly pear cactus fruits are harvested in the Santa Cruz watershed to this day. As are Gambel's, Mearns' and Scaled quail.

Well, why should we care about what people here have eaten in the past? First off, many of these food plants and animals are still adapted to the land and water resources here, and grow well without pampering. Next, many are delicious, nutritious and esteemed by the region's finest chefs and home-style cooks. Finally, they remain part of our identity, for there are stories, songs, jokes and recipes for them that still circulate among our friends and neighbors.

Unlike many other regions of the United States where the culinary treasures of the prehistoric and historic eras have been ethnically-cleansed from the landscape, the Rio Santa Cruz still carries the flavors and fragrances enjoyed here centuries ago. Some of these foods may play special roles in our future by combating climate change, water scarcity, heart disease and diabetes; others may simply taste so good that we cannot let them disappear from our memories.

Whatever the case, an increasing number of these foods are being returned to our kitchen tables and community feasts. We can vote for their persistence with our wallets, roasting pits, gardens and pocket books, or we can vote for a placeless and tasteless set of foods to land in our mouths and memories. Which will you choose?